

Deindividuation, Anonymity and Violence: Findings from Northern Ireland¹

Dr Andrew Silke
University of Leicester

ABSTRACT: The author examined the relation between anonymity and aggression in violent interpersonal assaults that occurred in Northern Ireland. Of the 500 violent attacks that the author studied, 206 were carried out by offenders who wore disguises to mask their identities. The findings revealed that significant positive relationships existed between the use of disguises and several measures of aggression. Disguised offenders inflicted more serious physical injuries, attacked more people at the scene, engaged in more acts of vandalism, and were more likely to threaten victims after the attacks. The author discussed these results within the framework of deindividuation theory.

Key words: aggression, anonymity, deindividuation

Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb (1952) described deindividuation as a psychological state where inner restraints are lost when “individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals” (p.382). According to Zimbardo (1969), a number of different “input” variables can produce this deindividuated state. Such variables include anonymity, group presence and physical arousal. Later research confirmed that a measurable deindividuated state exists (Diener, 1979; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1980, 1982) and that many of the “input” variables identified by Zimbardo (1969, 1975) could indeed produce this state.

Anonymity, in particular, has been identified as one of the key causes of deindividuation. It has been argued that anonymous conditions result in a loss of self-awareness and that this

¹ This paper was published as Silke, A. (2003). Deindividuation, anonymity, and violence: Findings from Northern Ireland. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 143(4), 493-499.

loss is the key element which facilitates deindividuation (Diener, 1980). Certainly a considerable number of studies have demonstrated that individuals who believe their identity is unknown are more likely to behave in an aggressive and punitive manner (e.g. Diener, Fraser, Beaman, & Kelem, 1976; Ellison, Govern, Petri, & Figler, 1995; Rehm, Steinleitner, & Lilli, 1987; Zimbardo, 1975). For example, Zimbardo (1969) showed that subjects who had their identities masked (with hoods covering their faces) were much more likely to administer electric shocks - and at more severe levels - than people whose identity was not hidden. Zimbardo's study was carried out under laboratory conditions using university students as subjects, but there is some evidence to suggest that the effect is seen in the real world as well. Ellison et al., (1995), for example, demonstrated a link between aggressive driving behaviour and anonymity in field research with real world samples.

Research examining deindividuation and serious violence is less common. One exception is Watson's (1973) work on warfare practices in 24 separate cultures. He found that warriors who masked their identities before going into battle - for example, by using body or face paint - were significantly more likely to kill, mutilate and torture captured prisoners compared to warriors who did not hide their identities. While this finding strongly suggests that one effect of being disguised is that it can lead to significant increases in violence, little if any subsequent research has examined the relationship between anonymity and extreme aggression.

The present study attempted to examine the role that anonymity plays in violent interpersonal assaults in Northern Ireland. The assaults considered in this study occurred within the context of politically motivated violence in the province. Since the paramilitary cease-fires of 1994, there has been a considerable and sustained increase in so-called 'punishment' attacks within the province. These attacks are carried out for a diverse range of motivations but involve the common characteristics of a group of attackers (normally members or supporters of one of the paramilitary groups) physically assaulting usually one victim with a variety of weapons (Silke, 1998). The injuries sustained by victims can be very severe and have on occasion resulted in death. Very little research has been carried out on this aspect of paramilitary activity in the province, though the issue has remained a significant problem in Northern Ireland's continuing peace process. This study is not concerned with the political context of the violence, but more with the behaviour of the attackers during the assaults. It was

predicted that incidents involving disguised attackers would involve more violence and aggression than those attacks where the offenders were not disguised.

Method

Sample

The research focused on violent assaults which occurred in a thirty month period ranging from July 1994 to December 1996. Information was gathered through a variety of means. First, extensive examination and documentation of all media reports concerning the incidents were made by the author. Key sources for this information included the *Belfast Telegraph*, *The Irish News*, *The News Letter*, *Sunday Life*, and *An Phoblacht/Republican News*. All of these are newspapers based in Northern Ireland. *The Irish Times* - a newspaper based in the Republic of Ireland – also was used. Accounts gathered from these sources were supplemented by reports from *Police Beat*, a monthly journal formerly published by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Information also was drawn from the press files of the *Irish Times* Belfast office. The media information was supplemented by material from the files of a victim support-group *Families Against Intimidation and Terror* (FAIT). Further information was drawn from RUC press releases dealing with the ‘punishment’ attacks. The completed database used in the study developed by the author contained information on 500 attacks. Each incident was coded according to the information contained in the report/s concerning that event. Each case entered into the database was for one victim only. If an incident involved two victims, then two cases were included. There were good reasons to do this as the experience, circumstances and treatment of victims could vary considerably even for the same incident.

Variables

Four variables were selected as indicators of offender aggression. These variables were: (1) *level of injury*; (2) *vandalism*; (3) *multiple victims* and (4) *exiling of victim*. The first variable was the level of injury inflicted on the victim. Victim injuries were coded into two categories, (1) *mild-moderate* and (2) *severe*. Mild-moderate injuries could range from cuts and bruises up to and including gun-shot wounds in the limbs. The

proportion of the cases suffering injuries of this type was 82.4%. Mild and moderate injuries were collapsed into one category as it was often difficult to clearly distinguish between injury types at these levels. Greater inter-rater reliability was established based on coding by the author and two inter-raters by coding injuries based on two categories with an emphasis on distinguishing severe injuries from other types. Severe injuries included multiple gun-shot wounds, multiple bone fractures, fractured skulls and punctured lungs. The proportion of the sample suffering severe injuries was 17.6%. Inter-rater reliability for coding of this variable was 92.7%. The second variable coded for whether the attackers vandalised property at the scene of the assault. Usually such damage involved the breaking of windows and furniture and the destruction of electrical items such as televisions. In total, vandalism occurred in 12% of the attacks in the sample. Inter-rater reliability for coding of this variable was 99.3%. The third variable concerned the number of people assaulted by the attackers. For the total sample, 63.4% of cases involved only one person being injured by the attackers. For the remaining 36.6% of cases, two or more people suffered physical injuries during the incident. Inter-rater reliability for coding of this variable was 98.6%. The fourth and final variable concerned whether the victim was exiled by the attackers after the attack. The paramilitaries frequently order people to move out of their home area as a form of punishment. Such expulsion orders are backed by the threat of extremely serious assault or death should the victim try to remain in the area. Many victims report that they would prefer to suffer physical assaults rather than be exiled from their homes and neighbourhoods. Normally, exiling serves as an alternative to physical punishment and is not routinely used in conjunction with physical attacks. Of the cases in the sample, 4.8% involved the use of exiling by the attackers. Inter-rater reliability for coding of this variable was 100%.

The deindividuation factor was coded by the variable *disguise*. Offenders were coded as disguised if they were reported to have worn masks, balaclavas, hoods or other clothing to cover or obscure their faces. The offenders were coded as not being disguised when there was no report of such efforts to hide identity. Of the cases in the sample, 41.2% involved offenders who were reported to be disguised.

Results

Table 1 shows that the use of disguises by attackers was significantly associated with more aggression at the offence scene and with more punitive treatment of the victims. The table shows that the physical injuries suffered by victims of disguised attackers tended to be more severe. Offenders who were disguised were 8.3% more likely than those who were not disguised to inflict serious injuries. Disguised offenders were 18.4% more likely to commit acts of vandalism at the scene of the attack and were 17.7% more likely to attack multiple victims. Finally, disguised offenders were 6.7% more likely to order the victim into exile. Overall, the table shows a clear association between the use of disguises and increased aggression and violence at the scene of the assault.

Table 1
Relationship Between Use of Disguises and Extremity of Aggression in Interpersonal Assaults

Offence Characteristics	Offenders Disguised	Not Disguised	X^2	DF
Severe Injuries Inflicted	24.0%	15.7%	4.90356*	1
Vandalism Committed	22.8%	4.4%	38.80806**	1
Multiple Victims	46.6%	28.9%	16.41306**	1
Victim Exiled	8.7%	2.0%	11.88867**	1

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Mainstream research in social psychology has long demonstrated that individuals who believe their identity is hidden are less inclined to act in an altruistic manner and are more inclined to engage in anti-social behaviour. The findings of this study certainly support this

trend. Northern Irish attackers who used disguises displayed significantly more aggressive and more punitive behaviour during and after interpersonal assaults. It is interesting to note that the effect was most pronounced with regard to what could be regarded as peripheral aggressive behaviours such as acts of vandalism and the exiling of victims. The findings suggest that disguised attackers display not only more extreme aggression, but also display a wider range of aggressive behaviour.

The results of this study are consistent with previous findings that anonymity facilitates aggression (Diener et al., 1976; Rehm et al., 1987) and also support the predictions made by deindividuation theory (Zimbardo, 1969). This research is significant in that like Watson (1973), it provides evidence that the deindividuation effect can be demonstrated outside of laboratory conditions and with regard to violent - and not simply aggressive - behaviour.

However, a note of caution needs to be introduced. Alternative explanations of the findings exist. For example, offenders who intended to behave more aggressively may have worn disguises as a precautionary measure. Johnson and Downing (1979) suggested that anonymity-induced aggression “may not require a reduction in the subjective sense of individuation but, in many instances, could reflect a simple reduction in perceived negative sanctions” (p.1537). In this perspective, disguise use is a risk reduction measure. However, such an interpretation is not entirely satisfactory within the context of this study. Ultimately, the type of violent attacks considered here are a very low risk activity for the paramilitaries. In the three year period from 1994 to 1996, the paramilitaries carried out 736 recorded ‘punishment’ attacks. During the same period, only five paramilitary members were convicted for involvement in the assaults (Silke, 1999). Considering the relatively intense security presence in Northern Ireland, this represents remarkably low levels of capture and conviction. Further, in the sample of 500 cases considered in this study, there was no correlation between the use of disguises and a reduced likelihood of arrest afterwards. In short, the attacks were carried out in a very low risk environment for the offenders, and there was no obvious association between disguise use and reduced negative outcomes.

Some concerns exist over the reliability of the information contained in the study. The data on the 500 incidents was not gathered through direct observation. It was instead gathered through secondary sources such as newspaper reports or the files and publications of other organisations. It is well established that newspaper reports can be incomplete and may also

contain factual inaccuracies (Robson, 1993). It would be unreasonable to expect that some faulty information did not enter the study. Such concerns were anticipated in advance of data collection and to address the problem, the study used a wide variety of sources over a relatively long period of time. Further, information was gathered on a large number of cases in the expectation that this would minimise the impact of isolated instances of errant or erroneous information. Nevertheless, a degree of uncertainty over the accuracy of the source material remains.

The correlational nature of this research does not provide causal evidence of a link between anonymity and increased aggression in violent incidents. It merely shows that with regard to these violent attacks in Northern Ireland, a number of significant associations do exist. Experimental control is notoriously difficult to achieve when studying physical violence in the real world. Nevertheless, the findings do support previous research on the facilitative role of anonymity and aggression and suggest that this effect stretches beyond laboratory research to acts of serious violence in the real world.

While this study is focused on violence in Northern Ireland, it should be possible to use a similar approach to investigate a range of different violent interpersonal crimes in other contexts. Using media accounts and victim support groups (possibly augmented by police and court files), rape, muggings, bank robbery and other crimes where offenders use force, could be examined for correlations between the use of disguises and more aggression during the course of the incident. Such studies could expand theoretical understanding of the relationship between anonymity, deindividuation and real-world aggression.

REFERENCES

- Diener, E. (1979). Deindividuation, self-awareness, and disinhibition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1160-1171.
- Diener, E. (1980). Deindividuation: The absence of self-awareness and self-regulation in group members. In P.B. Paulus (Ed.), *Psychology of group influence* (pp.209-242). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Diener, E., Fraser, S., Beaman, A., & Kelem, R. (1976). Effects of deindividuation variables on stealing among Halloween trick-or-treaters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 33, 178-183.
- Ellison, P., Govern, J., Petri, H., & Figler, M. (1995). Anonymity and aggressive driving behavior: A field study. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 10, 265-272.
- Festinger, L., Pepitone, A., & Newcomb, T. (1952). Some consequences of deindividuation in a group. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 47, 382-389.
- Johnson, R., & Downing, L. (1979). Deindividuation and valence of cues: Effects on prosocial and antisocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1532-1538.
- Prentice-Dunn, S., & Rogers, R. (1980). Effect of deindividuating situational cues and aggressive models on subjective deindividuation and aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 104-113.
- Prentice-Dunn, S., & Rogers, R. (1982). Effects of public and private self-awareness on deindividuation and aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 503-513.
- Rehm, J., Steinleitner, M., & Lilli, W. (1987). Wearing uniforms and

- aggression: A field experiment. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 17, 357-360.
- Robson, C. (1993). *Real world research*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Silke, A. (1998). The lords of discipline: The methods and motives of paramilitary vigilantism in Northern Ireland. *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, 7, 121-156.
- Silke, A. (1999). Ragged justice: Loyalist vigilantism in Northern Ireland. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11, 1-31.
- Watson, R.I. (1973). Investigation into deindividuation using a cross-cultural survey technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 25, 342-345.
- Zimbardo, P.G. (1969). The human choice: Individuation, reason and order, versus deindividuation, impulse and chaos. In W.J. Arnold & D. Levine (Eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* (Vol. 17) (pp.237-307). Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press.
- Zimbardo, P.G. (1975). Transforming experimental research into advocacy for social change. In M. Deutsch & H.A. Hornstein (Eds.), *Applying social psychology: Implications for research, practice and training* (pp.33-66). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence.